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ABSTRACT

This document is part of the series, "New Expeditions: Charting the Second Century of Community Colleges," sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Initiative. Addressed specifically in this paper is the history and current status of community colleges with regard to trends in enrollment, persistence rates, associate degree attainment, and transfer rates. The paper concludes with a look into the future of community colleges in regard to diversity, technology, operational reforms, and priorities for action. While community colleges make up only 28 percent of all colleges and universities, their collective enrollment constitutes about 37 percent of students in higher education. More than half of all Hispanic and African American students who attend college following high school enter two-year institutions. Overall, persistence rates continue to be a problem for all groups, and statistics show that in most two-year colleges, even those with diverse student enrollments, well over half of all associate degrees were earned by white students. Calls for reform have already been made to bring about the structural transformations needed to improve transfer education and persistence rates, recruit a diverse community of faculty, staff and students, and encourage greater interaction between faculty and students. (Contains 40 references.) (AF)

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ACCESS

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Issues Paper No. 2

Reexamining the Community College Mission

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the history and current status of community colleges by examining trends in enrollment patterns, persistence rates, associate degree attainment, and transfer rates. The paper then considers the future of community colleges with regard to diversity, technology, operational reforms, and priorities for action.

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INTRODUCTION

In the coming century, community colleges will play an increasingly important role in the higher education system, a role closely linked to the "dramatic increase in student diversity in American postsecondary education" (Pascarella and Terenzini 1998, 155). The following examination of the history and current status of students in two-year colleges focuses on critical trends affecting minority and nonminority students. The vision of the future suggested here considers these trends along with issues concerning diversity and admission, technology, and calls for reform, leading to a summary of action priorities for community colleges.

History and Current Status

Enrollment Patterns

Terenzini (1996), citing data from the National Center for Education Statistics (1994) and the *Chronicle of Higher Education: Almanac Issue* (1995) notes that between 1978 and 1991, the number of students enrolling in two-year colleges increased by 31 percent, as opposed to

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the 23 percent increase for four-year institutions. Terenzini concluded that the number of students attending community colleges will increase by another 11 percent by the year 2003. Two-year institutions make up nearly 28 percent of all colleges and universities, but their collectives enrollment constitute about 37 percent of all students in higher education.

More than half of all Hispanic and African American students who attend college following graduation from high school enter two-year institutions. The overrepresentation of Hispanic students in community colleges can be attributed to geographical coincidence of Hispanic populations in states that have highly developed community college systems, such as Florida, Texas, Colorado, New York, California, and Arizona. While many African American students enroll in historically black institutions, others are concentrated in historically white two-year colleges in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. Minority students represent 6 to 8 percent of all students enrolled in higher education, yet they constitute nearly 60 percent of the total enrollment in community colleges. These enrollment trends have been consistent over the last 25 years (Nora 1993).

Persistence Rates

Attrition rates for both minorities and nonminorities continue to be a serious problem in most community colleges. Figures on the persistence rates of community college students reported 10 or even 20 years ago (London 1989; Zwerling 1976) are no different today than those cited in earlier studies.

In a national study of minority and nonminority student populations in both two-year and four-year institutions, attrition rates for all groups remain high. While the attrition rates at certain institutions may imply that students are not dropping out in as large numbers as in the past, the researchers note that withdrawal trend at community colleges is still prevalent, specifically with regard to minority student populations. Attrition rates for minority students in two-year colleges is at about 60 percent and in some instances is as high as 80 percent (Nora and Rendón 1998).

It has been argued that because students attending community colleges are less economically situated within middle- and upper-middle-class America, are often members of minority groups, come less academically prepared from high school, do not possess a high desire to achieve academically, do not aspire for a college degree, and are less likely to be enrolled full time (Cohen 1989), their characteristics contribute to the high dropout rates of community college students (Astin 1975, 1977; Tinto 1987). Dougherty (1992) has found, however, that even when controlling for background, ability, high school record, and aspirations, students at community colleges are 10 to 18 percent more likely to drop out of college sometime during the first two years than students at four-year colleges with similar backgrounds, abilities, and aspirations. Student characteristics alone have not explained, and do not explain, the high dropout behavior of community college students.

Associate Degree Attainment

It also has been argued that the mission of community colleges is driven by a strong commitment to occupational, remedial, community, and adult education. Cohen (1988, 398) notes that "For the past 25 years, occupational education that leads to direct employment has been high on the priority list" of these institutions. One would not expect that the number of community college students graduating with an associate degree in liberal arts would constitute the majority of associate degrees earned in two-year colleges. Moreover, this view, coupled with the fact that more than 60 percent of minority students are enrolled in community colleges, may lead one to assume that a larger proportion of associate degrees earned in occupational fields would be conferred on minority students. Such is not the case. Sixty percent of associate degrees earned mainly in occupational fields are awarded to nonminority (white) students. Even in those two-year institutions in which the majority of students enrolled were nonwhite, well over half of all degrees were earned by white students (Nora and Rendón 1998).

While community colleges have always credited themselves with having an open-door policy aimed at serving those underrepresented in four-year colleges and universities, enrollment figures for high-tech and much more rewarding occupational programs reveal that minority students continue to be underrepresented (and at times unrep-

resented) in those areas (Dougherty 1992). The notion that the door is open to all groups in all programs at community colleges may be questionable.

Transfer Rates

Currently, the community college's collegiate or transfer function is being scrutinized (Cohen 1989; Dougherty 1987; Pincus and Archer 1989; Nora and Rendón 1990). At a time when more than 38 percent (College Board 1998) of all first-time, first-year students and more than 55 percent of first-time, first-year minority students are enrolled in two-year institutions, there is mounting concern about whether community colleges are meaningful access points for students who aspire to attain the baccalaureate degree. There are four reasons for this concern.

First, there has been a notable decline in the percentage of community college students who transfer to senior institutions over the last 25 years. In 1973, less than 43 percent of students in two-year colleges were participating in transfer programs, and by 1980, the proportion had dropped to nearly 30 percent (Friedlander 1980). Today, estimates of students who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions are at about 15 to 20 percent (Dougherty 1992; Nora and Rendón 1998; Tinto 1998).

Second is the growth of services that dilute the transfer function, particularly vocational-technical programs, community services, and remedial education. Associate degrees awarded in arts and sciences have declined over the years, whereas the number of associate degrees awarded in occupational programs has risen. This shift affects the number of baccalaureate degrees earned by minorities, because the emphasis is on terminal degrees and not on transfers.

Third, there is a decline in the academic performance of community college students at four-year receiving institutions (Nora and Rendón 1998; Dougherty 1992). Transfer students experience a transfer, or grade, shock during the first semester of enrollment from which some students recover and others do not. The drop in academic performance may be attributed to lowered expectations of students by community college faculty, particularly in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics (Rendón and Nora 1989; Dougherty 1992).

The fourth and final finding in the literature indicates that students with baccalaureate aspirations starting their college careers in two-year colleges have less of a chance of attaining their goals than comparable students in four-year institutions (Dougherty 1994; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). These four factors collectively serve to reduce the ability of community colleges to enhance the prospects for educational and socioeconomic mobility for students from low social class origins, who are disproportionately clustered in the community college sector. This factor is even more disturbing when one considers the body of evidence that examines community college students who successfully transfer and graduate from a four-year institution. Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) state: "Community college students who successfully negotiate the challenges of transferring to a four-year institution and who complete their bachelor's degree appear to achieve overall parity with similar four-year college students in such areas as job prestige, stability of employment, job satisfaction, and earnings." The problem arises when so many community college students aspire to a baccalaureate degree (from 40 percent [Dougherty 1992] to 80 percent [Nora 1993]), and yet so few actually transfer.

With such a large number of students aspiring to transfer to a four-year institution, why are so few actually transferring? Studies examining the transfer function have focused on extramural and intramural forces that conspire to feed the decline of college students. Examples of extramural forces include state and local policies, entering student characteristics, and the socioeconomic environment where the college is located. Intramural forces pertain to proposals for improving the college's academic and student support services that affect retention, counseling, and articulation with four-year institutions.

In a study of baccalaureate attainment, Dougherty (1992, 197) notes that "far too many community colleges provide at best cursory and haphazard encouragement and advice for their transfer aspirants." He stresses that only a small number of faculty at community colleges had frequent meetings with their students to discuss transferring, and only one-third of those faculty members had any information on their students' transfer intentions. Dougherty concludes: "The dearth of activity and informa-

tion in favor of transfer education reflects the weak commitment to the transfer program of too many community colleges today" (197). Dougherty cites the work by Cohen and Brawer (1987) as evidence for his conclusion: Only 19 percent of faculty teaching college transfer courses believed that "the primary function of the community college should be to prepare students for transfer to four-year colleges or universities." Only 34 percent of faculty surveyed agreed that "first-time freshmen in community colleges should be encouraged to earn, at the very least, the baccalaureate degree" (81–82).

Vision for the Future

What does the future hold for community colleges? What new trends in society will affect how two-year institutions conduct business? What should be the role of community colleges within this new context?

Minorities, Diversity, and Admissions

It is difficult to say that recent court decisions such as the *Hopwood* case and subsequent interpretations by university administrators and boards will not have an impact on two-year colleges. The exclusion of race in the admissions process, a process that is unfairly biased against minorities (all lower socioeconomic groups, for that matter), will only serve to reduce the acceptance rates of this sector of society at research universities. A reduction in the number of minorities at research universities, coupled with corresponding high attrition rates and low transfer rates, will ultimately exclude people of color from fully participating in society. Access to higher education will rest on two-year institutions as the only means of entrance into a higher educational setting leading to the attainment of an undergraduate degree. The future of the representation of all individuals in graduate and professional schools is greatly affected by the lack of a baccalaureate degree. Persistence and transfer, within this context, become even more instrumental in meeting the goals and mission of community colleges. It has been stated that community colleges are allied with the democratic principles of equal opportunity and open access (Brint and Karabel 1989; Cohen and Brawer 1990). Valadez (1996) argues, however, that "although community colleges provide access they have not necessarily provided opportunity for lower socioeconomic groups to achieve social mobility" (391).

Technology and Technological Information

Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) addressed the challenges students and faculty will face in the next century by stating, "Shifts identified . . . in the profile of the undergraduate student body and in the economic and political climate in which higher education finds itself are accompanied by a rapidly emerging and expanding array of computer and information technologies" (159). While all higher education institutions must incorporate new technologies in their teaching, this point takes on a higher sense of urgency for community colleges. First, for those attending two-year institutions without the desire to transfer and earn an undergraduate degree, social mobility, as reflected by advancement in a job (or even landing a job), will be adversely affected by not having the technological skills to compete and succeed in the labor market. Second, the role of community colleges is central to the retraining of America. Those individuals who are in a position to lose their jobs because machines, technology, and the economy have replaced them must seek a refuge where they can prepare to go back into society and once more become productive members in a global economy.

The Call for Reform

Calls have already been made to bring about operational and structural reforms at community colleges. Improving transfer education, providing more jobs on campus, holding more campus events, encouraging greater interaction between faculty and students through formal conferences in the office and informal contact outside, familiarizing would-be transfer students with four-year colleges through campus visits, providing more financial aid tailored to transfer students' special needs, clearly labeling transfer courses, establishing centers at community colleges to centralize and disseminate transfer information, and creating computerized systems to track student progress and indicate how well they are meeting transfer requirements are all noted by Dougherty (1992) as examples of operational reforms (204–205). However, he fur-

ther states that "operational reformers have been criticized by structural reformers for focusing exclusively on revamping how the community college operates while largely ignoring the need to change its very structure and position within the higher education system" (205). These structural reformers insist that, unless there is a reshaping of the community college and its relationship with the rest of higher education (such as converting community colleges into branches of state universities), higher persistence and transfer rates will not be attained.

More recently, learning communities have been proposed as the next phase in the development of community colleges, their responsiveness to students (Tinto 1998), and the need for future validation of all students in the classroom (Rendón 1994; London 1989; Valadez 1996). An underlying theme associated with these learning communities is the need to incorporate collaborative learning experiences in the classroom as a vehicle for achieving student involvement in the academic realm of two-year colleges (Tinto, Goodsell, and Russo 1993). Knowing what we know about students, future trends in higher education, and the mission of community colleges, what directions and what role should two-year colleges take?

A Blueprint of Priorities for Action for Community Colleges

As we enter the 21st century, community colleges will continue to see increases in numbers of students, diversity in student populations, and their import in the educational system as it relates to their nontraditional students. It is at these institutions that a more realistic representation of groups of society is found. With the possibility that current political winds are negatively affecting campus climates and the attitudes of faculty and administrators, two-year colleges can take on this challenge to bring about a more tolerant and accepting learning environment (or community) for all, provide an atmosphere conducive to learning, prepare all students to succeed in the labor market, instill in students the need to strive for higher levels of education, provide academic and social experiences that fully integrate students in every aspect of the college experience, and involve faculty in the validation and preparation of students.

The future of the collegiate function in community colleges must focus largely on the role of faculty, for it is the faculty who are responsible for the overall academic quality of students, regardless of whether they choose to transfer, earn an associate degree, or seek retraining. Faculty play an important role in identifying and facilitating student acquisition of academic competencies needed to complete general education requirements, and they play a critical role in the design of programs and practices to bring underprepared students into the higher education mainstream. While community college faculty desire better-prepared students (Cohen and Brawer 1982), unfortunately, a large cadre of students in two-year colleges will be anything but well prepared academically. Many of these students will begin postsecondary studies with lower levels of academic achievement than students at four-year institutions. The very skills students need to succeed in college (writing, interpretation, synthesis, analysis, and critical thinking) will need to receive much more attention than is now found.

In higher education settings, as in many other settings (managed care, mental health, business), the current and future emphasis will focus on outcome measures and the quality of services or programs. While the focus has shifted from outputs to outcomes, the process involved in achieving those outcomes must be assessed and empirically investigated. Anecdotal data as legitimate evidence of outcomes can no longer be accepted. Moreover, it is irresponsible to assume that, because other two-year colleges have tried, and possibly succeeded, in their efforts to address all of the issues noted earlier, those same practices and interventions will work on other campuses. O'Banion (1997) notes that community colleges provide the "ideal forum" for providing "the learning college." However, different practices work differently on different student populations at different two-year colleges. Many interventions and practices have a grounding in the literature and in the classroom. Others, while validated on specific student samples, must be further confirmed. As an example, collaborative learning experiences have been found to be associated with higher levels of tolerance for diversity and perceived gains in conceptualizing, analytical skills, personal development, and apprecia-

tion of artistic works in both two-year and four-year institutions (Tinto 1998; Cabrera, Nora, and Bernal 1998; Lin and Vogt 1996). However, in a separate study (Nora, Cabrera, and Sutton 1998), those same collaborative learning experiences were found to be related to *perceived gains* in certain skills, not to *actual measures* of cognitive gains.

The point is not to abandon efforts that sound useful, and that in the future, community colleges must design programs that are data driven, based on sound data analyses, and measure conceptually meaningful outcomes. The continuous improvement of instruction, programs, staff development, and services can be based only on empirical evidence of the impact of services and instruction on cognitive and noncognitive outcomes. Noting the nature of two-year colleges and their emphasis on teaching, community colleges, nevertheless, should strive to collect data and conduct appropriate research in the classroom and on the campus. It has been said that community colleges see their students as consumers of their products and that they are in tune with the needs of their diverse student populations. If such is the case, assessing programs, practices, interventions, activities, and goals are necessary to continually improve services and instruction. Accountability will no longer focus on how many more students make use of computers, how many students enter a learning center, and how many students seek counseling or academic advisement. Accountability will focus instead on the outcomes of seeking those services, the involvement of students in a new learning paradigm, and their participation in a collaborative learning environment. Moreover, these outcomes must be examined within the context of the process or interplay among different sets of factors that directly and indirectly affect learning, achievement, transfer, and persistence. It will no longer be enough to know what happened, but how it happened so that it may happen again.

For those who have been around community colleges for a while, many of the latest so-called innovations are not so very different than those tried 25 to 30 years ago. Maybe the future of two-year colleges does not hinge on what new learning fad to try: Maybe the future is to assess whether or not what they are trying fulfills the promise made years ago. As the only means of access to higher education for many, community colleges must keep the promise of providing a legitimate entry point for all. Industries have had to reexamine missions to keep more in tune with the needs of their customers. Perhaps now is the time for two-year colleges to ask their consumers once again what vision they hold for community colleges.

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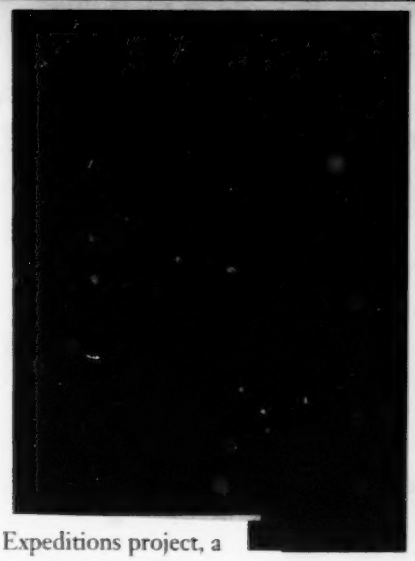

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